



CHAPTER TWO

Before You Vote

WHAT'S IN THIS CHAPTER

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Registering to Vote

In most places, before you can vote, you need to register.

What is registering? It's giving your name, address and other information to the government office that runs elections where you live. It might be a county or state or city office.

People have to register so that people vote in the right place and each person votes just once. When you register, the elections office will look at your address and determine which voting district you will vote in. Voting in the right place is important because who you get to vote for depends on where you live. For example, if you live on one street, you may have one set of candidates for city council; if you live the next block over, you may be in a different council ward and be voting for completely different people.



Usually the people in a voting district (or precinct) all go to vote in the same location. Most voting districts are pretty small, though in rural areas a district can stretch for miles.

How to Register

Many of the rules on registering to vote are not the same everywhere in the U.S. That's because elections are mostly run by states, cities, counties and townships. But there are some rules that apply everywhere: for example, under the "Motor Voter" law, motor vehicle offices across the United States must offer voter registration application forms.

Note: Filling out a form to register *does not mean* that you necessarily are registered to vote. Sometimes application forms get lost, or people don't fill them out correctly, or other mistakes happen. If a few weeks go by, and you have not received a card from the elections office telling you that you are registered, give them a call. If there's a problem, ask them to send you a new registration form, fill it out carefully and mail it back.

Generally, there are a few ways to register.

1. At motor vehicle and other government offices

You can get registration application forms in motor vehicle offices, public assistance offices (welfare, food stamps, Medicaid), agencies that help people with disabilities (for example, vocational rehabilitation), public libraries and other public buildings.

In fact, when you get or renew your driver's license, the worker is supposed to ask you whether you are registered to vote and offer you a registration application form if you are not. If they don't ask you, you can ask them for a voter registration form.

2. Registering by mail

But you don't have to wait until your next trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles. You can start the process of registering by mail now. Although it may not be required, it is a good idea to include a copy of your photo ID with your voter registration application when you mail it in.

You can call your local elections office, and ask them to send you a voter registration application in the mail. Just fill it out and send it back.

HOW TO FIND YOUR LOCAL ELECTIONS OFFICE

In most places, your elections office will be listed in the phone directory in the government pages. It may be listed under elections, board of elections, supervisor of elections, or city, county or township clerk, registrar or auditor.

If you have trouble finding the right office, you can contact the state elections office (see page 49) or the League of Women Voters in your state (page 46).

You can also find information on registering to vote on the League of Women Voters Web site. Go to www.lwv.org/voter and click on "Get Out and Vote." ★

3. Get started online

You can also start the registration process online, but you cannot actually register online. The League of Women Voters online voter registration walks you through the process. Go to www.lww.org/voter/register.html and choose the language you want to work in. Fill out the form. When the form is completed, print, sign and mail it to the address given.

Note: A few states won't accept the "universal" mail-in form; instead, when they get that form they will send you a state form which you then have to fill out and mail in. You'll get registered anyway—it just means an extra step.

4. At the elections office

The traditional way to register is to go in person to the local board of elections office or county courthouse and fill out a form. You don't have to mail anything – you just hand it in. (If you have trouble finding out where that is, you can call your state League of Women Voters. See page 46.)

5. In public places

Sometimes, especially when elections are coming up, you may find volunteers at tables in public places offering to register you. These may be at colleges, street fairs or other places where people gather. It's a really easy way to get registered.

SAVE THAT NOTICE

Within a few weeks after you send in or hand in your registration application, you should get a notice in the mail telling you that you are now officially a registered voter. Hold on to that notice. Often those notices tell you where you go to vote, and that's something you'll want to know later on. ★

Filling Out the Registration Form

If you get a registration application form from your state, county or city, we can't tell you exactly what it will look like. That's because each place has a slightly different form.

These forms always ask for your name, address, date of birth and U.S. citizenship. You also have to give your driver's license number, if you have a license, or the last four digits of your Social Security number. If you don't have either a driver's license or a Social Security number, the state will assign you a voter identification number. These numbers are to help the state keep track of voters. Check the form carefully, including the back, to see the rules for the place where you live.

If you want to make sure that you get properly registered, do these three things:

- Fill out the form accurately and completely, and try to make sure people can read it.
- Register early if you can — say, right after you move to a new place. Avoid the pre-election rush.
- If you don't hear from the elections office within three weeks, call to find out what's happening with your registration.

Are You the Party Type?

Often when you fill out your registration application, it will ask for your choice of party. That is, do you want to register as a Republican or Democrat or some other party (for example, Green, Libertarian or Reform)? How you answer this question is up to you, but be aware that in some places, if you don't choose a party when you register, you will not be allowed to vote in that party's primary.

That's because in many states, if you want to vote in the primary election of a certain party, you need to be registered as a voter with that party. So, for example, if you want to be able to choose who the Democratic candidate will be for president, senator and other offices, you should probably register as a Democrat. If you think of yourself as independent, or you don't care much about choosing the candidates for any particular party, you can register as "independent" or "no party."

You *do not* have to fill in a political party. Even if you register as being with a certain party, you can vote in the general election for any candidate.

Who Can Register?

To register in any state, you need to be a U.S. citizen, 18 or older by the next election, and a resident of the state. Most, but not all, states have two other rules as well: 1) you can't be a felon (someone who has committed a serious crime), and 2) you can't be mentally incompetent. In a few places, you can vote in local elections even if you are not a U.S. citizen. To check the rules for your state, call your state's elections office (see page 49).

Some people may not be sure where to register to vote. This is often true of college students, whose families live in one place and who go to school somewhere else. Usually, those students can legally register in either place; it depends on where you feel your real residence is.

When to Register

In most states, you need to register at least 30 days before Election Day. But that's not true everywhere: In Connecticut you can register up until 14 days before an election, in Alabama 10 days. Federal law says that you can't be required to register more than 30 days before the election. For details on these rules, see http://fecweb1.fec.gov/votregis/state_voter_reg_deadlines02.htm.

Six states have same-day registration – Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming. You can go to the polling place, register and vote at the same time. You should bring some identification and proof of where you live. In North Dakota, you can vote without registering.

If you don't hear from the elections office within three weeks, call to find out what's happening with your registration.

Find Out Where to Vote

One thing that people often forget about until the last minute is finding out where to vote.

If you receive a voter identification card or a note saying that you are registered, keep it where you'll be able to find it. Those notes often say where your polling place is.

If you have access to the World Wide Web, you can go to the Web site for your local government and its election department. Some sites allow you to enter your address and find your polling place, or have useful maps.

Sometimes newspapers list polling places a day or two before the election. Also, you can always call your local elections office and ask them where you vote. However, that number tends to be very busy on Election Day – so make your life easy and find out your polling place *before* Election Day.

If You Are Moving

If you move, it's a good idea to register at your new address as soon as you can – especially if you've moved to a new county or a new state.

If you have moved within a county or city, you can often vote in the polling place for your old address. Or you can register again, telling them your new address, and then you can vote at the polling place for your new address.

If you change your name, you should let your local election office know. You can use your state's registration application form or the "universal" registration form to change your registration.

It's a Public Record

You should know that lists of registered voters are public records. Anyone can look at them. (They can't see how you voted, though.) That means that after you register you may get mailings from political parties or candidates or causes.

Absentee and Mail-in Voting

Many people don't wait until Election Day to vote. Instead, they get a mail-in or absentee ballot. That's a paper ballot listing all the same candidates and ballot measures that people will vote on during Election Day.

This way of voting is known in many places as absentee voting or voting by absentee ballot. That's because it's especially useful for people who will be away from home on Election Day.

But many states these days allow anyone who wants to vote by mail to do so. Maybe you think it will be hard to get to the polling place on Election Day, or maybe you would just rather vote in the privacy of your home.

You can call your local elections office to see if you can get a mail-in ballot, even if you are going to be near home on Election Day. You may also be able to e-mail your elections office. In some places, you need to have a good reason to get a mail-in ballot (like being away from home). Other places will allow anyone to vote by mail. Your local elections office may be in the phone book under the name of your city, county or township, listed as the board of elections, elections department, clerk, registrar or auditor.

If you want to vote by mail, you should write your local elections office about 30 days before Election Day, sending them a signed note or letter saying you want an absentee ballot. The ballot will arrive in the mail. Fill it out and mail it in. In some states, the return envelope for your absentee ballot needs to be signed by a witness.

If you are overseas, it's a good idea to write your elections office 45 days before the election. But don't write to them too much earlier than that. If you write too early, the ballots will not be printed yet, and there's some chance that your request might get lost.

If you move, it's a good idea to register at your new address as soon as you can – especially if you've moved to a new county or a new state.

In most states, for your absentee ballot to be counted, it has to be received by the end of Election Day. So it's a good idea to mail it a few days before Election Day.

If you registered by mail, there are eight states in which you have to vote in person the *first time* you vote. Those states are Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. And in all states, if you registered by mail, you will also need to show identification the first time you vote. Check with your elections office to see what forms of identification are accepted.

Early Voting

To help people vote who can't make it to the polls on Election Day, a number of states are trying a new approach called early voting. That is different from absentee voting because you have to actually go somewhere to vote, but you can do it a couple of weeks early. Usually the local government will set up certain times and places for early voting. Early voting was pioneered in Texas and is widely used there.

If You're Out of the Country

If you are outside the U.S. on Election Day, you can vote using an absentee ballot.

If you are in the U.S. armed forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or Coast Guard) or if you are living with a family member who is in one of the services, the military goes out of its way to help you vote.

Most military units have voting assistance officers to help you get and fill out the forms you'll need to register and vote. If you need help with voting, you can call (703) 588-1584. A toll-free number you can use in the U.S. is (800) 438-VOTE (8683). For toll-free numbers you can use from many countries, check www.fvap.gov/services/tollfree.html.

In addition, you can learn about the Federal Voting Assistance Program for military and other overseas voters at www.fvap.gov, or e-mail vote@fvap.ncr.gov with questions.

If you're a non-military U.S. citizen who is overseas when Election Day approaches, you can contact the U.S. embassy or consulate near you for help in getting registered and voting by absentee ballot. The site www.fvap.gov has useful information too.

Because of international mail delays, if you really want to vote from overseas, it's good to start the process at least 45 days before Election Day. Federal law makes it fairly easy to vote from abroad for federal offices (president and Congress). There is a single postcard-size registration application form you can use to register for federal elections. You can get this form from voting assistance officers on military bases, from U.S. embassies and consulates, and online at www.fvap.gov/pubs/onlinefpca.html. That Web site also explains special state rules about use of the postcard registration form.

If you want to vote for state and local races too, you may need to get a state registration application, which takes extra time.

Deciding How to Vote

OK, let's say you've got yourself registered, you're planning to vote. You're part of the show—you're feeling good.

So who are you going to vote for? That can be a big question. Fortunately, there are lots of ways of figuring it out.

Sometimes it's not hard at all: You know which candidates you like and don't like.

Many people figure out how to vote based on political parties. There are two main political parties -- Democrats and Republicans -- as well as a number of smaller parties, including the Green, Libertarian, Natural Law and Reform parties. If a person generally agrees with how a certain party approaches the issues, they usually vote for that party's candidates.

In making decisions about which candidates to vote for, it's worth thinking about where certain candidates stand on the issues that are important to you. For example, if you have children in school, you may want to find out what the candidate says about funding for schools. Or if you're concerned about environmental problems, it makes sense to read the candidate's materials and see what he or she says about those problems.

Conversations with friends and family can be helpful. These are people who probably share lots of your values, so talking with them about candidates and issues can help you (and them) get clear on your choices.

If you want to find out more, these are some well known sources for information on candidates and ballot measures.

- Many local Leagues of Women Voters create nonpartisan voter's guides. These are excellent sources of unbiased information. Check with your local League.
- Recommendations from organizations you belong to or trust.
- Literature from candidates may be mailed to you, handed to you or left at your door.
- The news media – newspapers, magazines, television, radio.
- Debates in person or on TV are a good way to see how the candidates compare side by side.
- Campaign ads on TV, radio, newspapers. Ads tell you what a candidate thinks are the issues most important to you. Sometimes the candidate says where she or he stands. Do you agree or disagree?
- The Internet plays a bigger role in elections every year. Some Web sites, like www.dnet.org, give unbiased information; they are not part of any political party or campaign.

Many politicians and most sides of an issue will have a Web site. But pay careful attention, because not every Web site that looks like it's a candidate's official Web site actually is one. Sometimes people put up personal Web sites for candidates or issues they like. There have even been cases where people have put up fake Web sites to embarrass a candidate they didn't like.

A good Internet search engine to find out about candidates or issues is www.google.com.

- In some places, state or local governments will send out official voter information. It may just be a sample ballot, which shows you what you'll be voting for on Election Day. Or it may contain more information, including statements from different candidates or people for and against a ballot measure.

Ballot measures can be even trickier to vote on than candidates. A ballot measure is basically a law that is being voted on by the people. Sometimes it is put on the ballot by an official group like the state legislature or city council. Some states allow people to put measures on the ballot by getting lots of signatures on a petition.

All of the ways we just discussed of finding out about candidates also apply to ballot measures. Sometimes ballot measures are written in a way that is hard to understand – for example, when you read the title, it might seem that a measure will give more money for schools, but it may actually lower the amount of money for schools. That's why it's good to try to learn about these issues before you get to the voting booth.

If you want to find out about local ballot measures – for your city, county or school district – you'll probably need to pay attention to local news media. ★

